

## BEN WILSON 1967-1984

## Committed to memory

Tribune reporter K.C. Johnson played against Ben Wilson in the slain Simeon star's last high school game, and 25 years later, the killing has lost none of its impact

On March 24, 1984, Ben Wilson and his Simeon teammates graciously accepted a trophy and cheerfully ended one basketball season.

Led by Purdue-bound Everett Stephens, our Evanston team was victorious, a run culminating a community that had seen its share of racial tensions.

But in the Class AA state championship game at Champaign's Assembly Hall, Wilson's teammates—and Bobby Traylor's, and Tim Bakula's—dropped in to 25-1, state runners-up to a team that clearly was better than us.

That's why even after Wilson became the nation's No. 1-ranked high school player over the next season, we no longer looked to the fall rematch.

Little did anybody know: that championship game was Wilson's last.

Around noon on Nov. 25, 1984, Wilson, 17, inadvertently barged into one of three youths outside a convenience store just blocks from his house. Words were exchanged. Three shots were fired. Two players, Wilson's score and free throwers. He died at a scene the next day.

That was only about 13 short hours before Wilson was to begin his senior season—with his next rivalry at DePaul or Illinois—against our Evanston team in the Rockford Bayless Tournament. The news was devastating. "The Branch" that didn't matter. We practiced. In a gym, at our gym, on the day he was shot. We waited, wondering if we'd even board the bus to Rockford, on the day he died.

On Simeon's rail—and in honor of the player everybody called Benji—we got on the bus. We played all day. On Nov. 25, a quarter-century will have passed since Wilson's death. And yet the memory of one of the greatest players to ever play for Simeon during an emotional program ceremony remains fresh.

"It was surreal," says Steve Wood, now a history teacher and girls varsity basketball coach at Evanston. "We were looking in the eyes of peers, knowing that someone our age had just been murdered. That put mortality into perspective."

Wilson's death touched a nerve in Chicago and beyond, sending outrage and demands for street violence to the fore. Roughly 6,000 marched his way to Simeon's gym two days after he died. The following day, 18,000 crowded into Jesse Jackson's Operation 100,000 march quarters for his funeral.

Jackson, Chicago mayor Harold Washington and the crowd screamed for reasons to be learned from this waste.

"I kept coming to myself. It was time for that change. I made trips to Simeon and Evanston. I taught our players, coaches, teachers and friends. What do they remember? Do they still feel it? They had his death affected them?"

This was the dominant answer: Anyone who would had any contact with Benji's death met an answer story to feel his impact.

66 "I think about him every day," says Nick Anderson. Anderson played 13 seasons in the NBA, mostly with the Orlando and now Wilson's No. 15 throughout. His personal tribute.

Anderson grew up on the West Side. From his kid, he transferred to Simeon on the North Side to join his father with Wilson, to see if Simeon could defend its team crown.

Instead, he watched his friend die.

"I will never forget that, seeing Ben like that," Anderson says. "It still."

Anderson regrets his company, talks of happier times. "I can remember that summer that I transferred, we spent the whole summer together, playing No. 1 player in the nation. He didn't let that go to his head. He was just one of the guys."

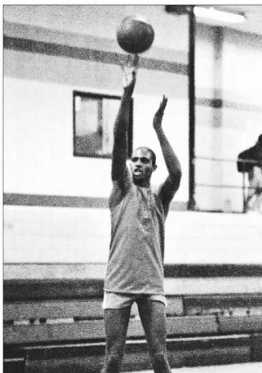
But was it that light decision? To play, in Rockford, against Simeon, on the day he died? I've struggled with that.

"Even though he was so talented, he was so humble. His character always shined through. Being the No. 1 player in the nation, he didn't let that go to his head. He was just one of the guys."

But was it that light decision? To play, in Rockford, against Simeon, on the day he died? I've struggled with that.

"I think it was because I believe that he was Benji because we were all Benji," Anderson says.

We were, though. That night was long in your throat.



Simeon star Ben Wilson was the No. 1 high school basketball player in the nation and coming off a Class AA state championship when he was shot Nov. 25, 1984. He died the following day. TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Mary Wilson, right, sings at a vigil on the 2nd anniversary of the death of her son, about whom she wrote a book. TRIBUNE PHOTOS

As a most tender, Anderson wasn't yet eligible and watched it snow closer. As a minor-league server, I watched most of the game to listen from the bench.

"I remember we came out and there was a moment of silence," Anderson says. "And you could hear people crying in the stands and on the floor."

"I couldn't focus on anything. I'm wondering what's going on, why we have to be there. But we played that game for Benji."

Simeon won, crushing us 75-36. Anderson and I have crossed paths occasionally on the NBA. Anderson says, "This is only the second time we've talked about Benji. How could any good come from this tragedy?"

"It motivated me to make the NBA for Benji, and it also taught me never to take life for granted because you can be here today and gone tomorrow," Anderson says. "It also taught me that friendship is very important. When you have true friends, you never forget them. And he was surely a true friend of mine."

Wood has one son and former teammate Eric Dorch is in Chicago, attending an of the time he did stop to aid passengers in a broken-down van.

any Simeon coach Bob Henrich deciding to play the day Wilson died.

"I gained an even greater respect for Simeon and they will inspire to honor Ben and play in a very different way," Wood says. "I don't know if that's toughness or heart or determination, but they want out and had a very successful season without their best player."

"I was shocked they did that," Wood says. "I was shocked they did that."

Wilson went on from their sports to become a star in the Class AA state championship in Champaign. Five months later, it took James a new home to find O'Donnell, 15, and William Moore, 16, guilty of murder and attempted robbery.

Moore, who fired the shot, received a 40-year prison term. It took him 30 years. Both are still in prison.

"Basketball is a brotherhood," Dorch says. "I used to go to pick-ups at 6:30 and Dorch and I on the West Side and run into these guys. When you run into them, it's not like, 'What, I'm from the suburbs.' It's, 'I'm a basketball player. We all shared that respect. And Ben was that kind of brotherhood.'

"I have a son who plays basketball now. And I always tell him to look at the players who passed the way for you, play them respect and then go have that same love for the game."

"Benji's death has stayed with Wood."

"As head guys look at that coach Benji, I try to make him be the present," he says. "Ben has come up a couple of times when I've talked about him in the past."

In the moment, being accountable for what you're doing because you never know when your time is going to be up."

"There's a guy who had I'd say, 'one of the most talented players I ever seen. And I hate to say it, but he had a hard time. And he made a huge impact with his life.'"

Wilson's death has stayed with Wood.

"Wilson was a defensive stopper and rebuffed the expectations to try to guard Wilson."

"His style of play demanded his teammates energy because he gave him all," says Dorch, a supervisor for Blue Cross of Illinois. "Of course we searched through that practice the day he was shot. And we could not let him be lost."



Ben Wilson with Simeon coach Bob Henrich in 1984. TRIBUNE PHOTOS

A Simeon, a pairing of Wilson hangs above the gym door. The artist was a closemate. It shows him hitting a triple basket jumper, scoring on a left-handed layup over West Jordan's Henry Battle and sending in the graduation gown he never got to wear.

There's also a team photo and the trophy from the 1984 state championship. The gym is named after Wilson, but there is no signage. His No. 15, once usually worn by the team's best player, was retired permanently on his last day.

Like Anderson, like Simeon NBA player Bobby Simeon before him, Derrick Rose wore No. 15 last season. Benji's number, Mary de-termining her son's life. Rose read it in one sitting.

"They try to keep his spirit alive, not just in the program but throughout the whole school," Rose says. "Benji meant so much to us, and his story really scared me, seeing him happen to a great player. Anything can happen."

"I just wanted to stay out of the situation. I didn't go to parties or stupid places. I was a loner. I didn't go nowhere but to my friends' houses and home."

At the end of our conversation, Rose and I, no lockers, June 25, 1984, in the first meeting of his hand. We shake. Slowly.

Don't take nothing for granted, right? Rose says.

Wilson was born exactly 41 years before me, and his death isn't why I pursued a career covering the NBA.

His death isn't why Nick Anderson or Derrick Rose scored in the NBA.

His death isn't why Reggie Miller returned to Simeon after playing with Wilson and having his own minor league baseball career. Or why Terry Dorch chose his love of the game with his son, or why Steve Wood coaches at Evanston.

But Wilson's spirit is still with all of us, in some ways, at some times. As the conversation with Anderson winds down, I tell him I plan on visiting Wilson's grave.

"Give my love to Benji," Anderson says from inside. "Anderson says from inside."

"I've been to Benji's grave. Simeon, Wilson rests in plot No. 137 in the Garden of Meditation section, not far from his beloved mother, Mary, who passed in December 2000.

Wood stands before and orange leaves across Wilson's marker, a single cone shell with Simeon's half figure de-termining a ball, a net and the words "Benji in the NBA" (the 15 seasons) I used there. Benji's death, an amazing reminder that the changes that took Wilson still live.

This isn't right. There's a flower shop a short drive away. A single cone shell sold a single cone for \$2, for making it with greenery.

But for Benji's grave, now there is silence.

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